DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 302 807 CS 009 449

AUTHOR Farber, Evan Ira
TITLE Turning Students into Readers: Librarians and Teachers Cooperating.
PUB DATE May 88
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Reading Association (33rd, Toronto, Canada, May 1-6, 1988).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Academic Libraries; College Students; Higher Education; Librarians; Library Instruction; Library Material Selection; Reading Interests; *Recreational Reading; Student Attitudes

ABSTRACT

This paper presents a brief history of the decline in recreational reading in university libraries and provides suggestions for ways to reverse the trend. The paper argues that students' anxiety about using the university library can be reduced by incorporating library instruction into existing courses. The paper also argues that prominent, attractive displays of current fiction may entice students into more recreational reading in the library. (RS)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Evan Ira Farber
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

ED302807

TURNING STUDENTS INTO READERS: LIBRARIANS AND TEACHERS COOPERATING

Evan Ira Farber

I'm going to focus on college students. Not because the issues are more important with them. Or even more interesting. No, I'm going to focus on them because they're what I know best -- for most of my adult life I've advised college students, taught them, and worked with them both as an administrator and as a reference librarian. To be sure, some of what I say is applicable only to college students and perhaps of interest only to those working with them, but I think that some, perhaps much of what I say can certainly be related to adult learners and to secondary school students, and, to a somewhat lesser extent, I'm sure, to elementary school students. But my reference point will be the undergraduate, the 18 to 21-year-old who is fairly serious about his or her college education.

Why don't such students use libraries for reading? Of course, some do, but their number is, I'm afraid quite small. And I don't mean reading for courses. Certainly students use the library for that -- for reading books on reserve, or using the library as simply a quiet, comfortable place to read their own textbooks. And certainly, a fair number of students come into the library to read the daily newspapers or their favorite magazines. But reading Charles Dickens or James Dickey? Or the latest Paris Review or Antaeus? Or other good recent novels, or short stories, or -- perish the thought -- some contemporary poetry? Not likely. Maybe Stephen King, or more likely, the latest Rosemary Rogers or Sidney Sheldon -- but "good" reading? Unless it's related to a course, very probably not.

Why not? Is it lack of time? Lack of interest? Simply a continuation of personality traits shaped during the pre-college years? Surely these reasons can account for several, perhaps many, of the students who don't read. But what about those others who did use their public

CS005449

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

libraries, who were regular, if not avid readers since they were weaned on Dr. Seuss and A. A. Milne? What happened to them in college?

I suggest two possible reasons. One is that recreational reading is not encouraged in academic libraries. No, not just "not encouraged" (excuse the proliferation of negatives, please) -- not just not encouraged, but hardly given a chance. The other results from a syndrome known as "library anxiety." It's a syndrome which may not be endemic to college students, but is certainly common among them. It's a syndrome that causes students to -- if not actually avoid libraries -- at best use them as little as possible. I'll come back to this later. I certainly don't mean to imply that these two reasons are the only ones student don't read for pleasure. But I do say that they're not insignificant and, furthermore, that they're easy to correct, and much of what I have to say will be on ways of correcting them.

Years ago -- many, many years ago -- before World War II, it was widely regarded as one of the important functions of the college librarian to encourage the reading habit. One has only to look at the early volumes of Library Literature, the index to articles and books in the field of library science, to see the many articles on the subject. Or to look at the floor plans of college libraries in the 1920s and '30s to see that a browsing room was an almost standard feature. But as higher education became more and more concerned with independent study, with "research," less attention was given to extra-curricular reading. What may have been the finishing touch -- for a while, at least -- was a very influential book published in 1940, Teaching With Books: A Study of College Libraries, by Harvie Branscomb, at the time Director of Duke University Libraries, and later Chancellor of Vanderbilt University. Branscomb, for a project

sponsored jointly by the Association of American Colleges and the American Library Association, was investigating the very limited role of libraries in undergraduate education, and, in particular, the underutilization of book collections by student. An admirable study in almost every other way, but unfortunate in Branscomb's opinion that if students take their studies seriously "there will be little time for outside reading. . . . The college library , it can be argued, needs to take it own task more seriously, not to attempt the role of the public library, the great concern of which with recreational reading is itself questionable."

I said that Branscomb may have given "the finishing touch" to the de-emphasizing of recreational reading. That's probably not fair. It's more likely that he was reflecting a changing attitude. But in any case, there's not much doubt that the encouragement of extra-curricular reading has been given much less attention than formerly, and again, I only need to point to the decreasing number of items on it in the professional literature, or the changing design of libraries.

There were, of course, major exceptions. My mentor, Guy R. Lyle, was not only a distinguished college and university librarian, but also the author of the standard text, The Administration of the College Library, which went through five editions, from 1944 to 1974, and was used by college librarians across the country as their vade mecums. In each of the five editions, a chapter was devoted to encouraging recreational reading. But as much influence as that book had, the portion on recreational reading was hardly heeded. In 1981, College Librarianship, a collection of essays edited by William Miller and D. Stephen Rockwood, was published, and though most of it related to aspects of the college library's collection, there is only a passing reference to recreational reading.

I know I was very much influenced by Guy Lyle, under whom I worked for seven years. Whether it was my own love of books, or my happy experiences with public libraries, or my working under Guy Lyle -- probably a combination of these and other factors -- I have felt it an important part of my role as college librarian to encourage, in whatever way I can, students' reading and love of the printed word. Indeed, some of the most satisfying encounters with students are about recreational reading -- a student saying how much he or she enjoyed a particular book or recommending that we buy a new work by a favorite author. Just the other day, I was talking to a couple of prospective students about the library's role in the college. (The Admissions Office makes it a point to have prospectives and their parents see the library and for me to talk briefly with them.) One of them, a young woman from the San Francisco area, asked whether or not the library has much current fiction. I showed her our collection, which is not just substantial, but is prominently displayed, and then said to her that I was delighted to have her ask -- that it was the first time I'd been asked that question by a prospective student -- and wondered why she asked. "Well," she responded, "the Admissions Office told me there weren't any really good bookstores in town, and I like to keep up with new fiction." Now, she is undoubtedly an unusual student, but I cite the incident not only because it gave me such pleasure that I wanted to repeat it, but primarily to show that there still are such students.

How <u>do</u> we get students to read?

A number of writers on the subject have suggested that it's up to the faculty to do the job. That, however, is a forlorn hope. There are very few college faculty members who will encourage student to read outside of their courses. Certainly a professor of history will suggest that his

or her students read some other works than those assigned, and an English teacher may even recommend some novels -- but probably only those novels that have become part of the professional canon -- which means those they encountered during their graduate studies. I'm exaggerating, of course, but for the most part it's true; faculty do not encourage extra-curricular reading. It is, I think, very much up to librarians.

First, librarians need to provide the materials. This seems simple, being merely a matter of selection. That in itself is not simple, because it means knowing the audience and then making a judicious selection from the many, many titles available. It's a time-consuming task, though from my experience, a most interesting and pleasurable one, one of the really "fun" things I do. But for most librarians, that procedure is complicated by the budgeting aspects. That is, there is just so much in our budgets for acquisitions, and if some of it is going to be spend on current fiction and poetry, or on periodicals which contain good creative writing, some departmental budgets will be reduced accordingly. In these times of limited budgets, when most of us don't really have enough funds to keep up with faculty requests, siphoning off departmental funds for what many faculty might consider "frivolous" purchases could have a negative political impact. There are ways of responding, but it takes a strong library director whose status is secure.

Then, the materials not only need to be acquired, but they need to be made available. That means not just stowing them on shelves somewhere, but displaying them attractively in a prominent place, so that passers-by will be enticed to browse. Few academic libraries keep dust jackets on books purchased. What a waste! Those jackets are designed (often by top-

notch designers) to attract readers, and librarians ought to capitalize on that.

There are many other things libraries can do to promote reading. Exhibits, author talks, contributing book reviews or notes to campus publications, highlighting new subscriptions or new books of particular interest. All of these are impelled by recognition of the library's educational role. Guy Lyle's words, written fifteen years ago, are still worth noting. "The college library should stimulate and encourage general reading because the formal processes of college are not the whole of college, and reading for its own sake is an essential attribute of culture. In a technological society, reading carries on the humane tradition. It is the college library's function to provide every opportunity for its development." There are any number of ways of providing these opportunities, none of them terribly profound, but surely important.

I suggested earlier that another deterrent to student recreational reading is a syndrome known as "library anxiety." I think every college and university librarian had known -- or at least suspected -- that students, especially first-year students, don't feel especially comfortable in using the library. That suspicion was confirmed a couple of years ago by a study done at one of the medium-sized state university libraries. Freshmen taking a beginning composition course were asked to keep a journal in which they recorded their feeling when they first had to use the university library. How were those feelings expressed? In such words as "anxious, scared, confused." Of course that was their response. Here were students mostly from small towns, from rural areas, who had used local public and high school libraries -- libraries with a few thousand volumes, with simple card catalogs -- and suddenly they were faced with a library of

hundreds of thousands of volumes, a massive card catalog with complex headings, a variety of service points, unfamiliar terms, strange surrounding and busy workers. . . . Of course they were "anxious, scared, confused."

And the result?

Avoidance. Using the library only when they had to, and then not very effectively. Such students are hardly apt to be enticed by exhibits, by book notes, by publishing, by book displays no matter how attractive, how appealing. The library, for them, is a place to be avoided.

How do we overcome this?

First, by design, by making the library an attractive, comfortable place; by having a staff that is friendly and helpful; by keeping bureaucratic indicators and procedures to a minimum.

These, however, are going to change perceptions and practices only slightly. What libraries should do to make student feel comfortable is make them feel comfortable, feel in control of their environment. People avoid a situation because they don't feel at ease in it, feel out of place.

How to do this?

To my mind, and to many other librarians', the most effective way is by teaching students how to use libraries, so that they can view the card catalog as a source of information, the indexes and bibliographies as aids -- all of them easy to use -- if one knows how. Once they understand -- even very imperfectly -- that all these are key to the organization of information -- and that they can use these keys -- albeit somewhat inexpertly -- they'll feel much better about the library.

Ah, but how to teach them? There's the rub, because it's not easy. It sounds easy -- Why not just offer a course in using the library -- but that's deceptive. Not because it's not easy, but because it's not very effective -- for two reasons. First of all, unless it's a required course, very few students will take it -- and those that do will be the highly motivated ones, the ones that would probably learn how to use the library in any case. Secondly, even if it is required, it will amost certainly be not very exciting -- to say the least -- and merely confirm students' negative feelings about libraries -- and librarians. Most students, after all, are not really interested in learning how to use the library. I'm interested -- you may be.. But not most students. At least not until they need to use the library. Then, they'll listen, will implement what they're taught, and thus learn by doing -- always the most effective way of learning.

The only way of teaching students how to use libraries, is through their regular courses. It's the course, after all, that's the coin of the realm, and that's what we must trade with. Students are primarily interested in getting better grades, or saving time, and if we can show them how to fulfill their assignments more efficiently and effectively so that they can save time, can do better work, then they will listen.

Library instruction should be built into the course -- not just in English courses, but in all subjects where finding information is important -- in psychology, in biology, in art history, in business, in chemistry, etc., etc. Students then come to expect that instruction, expect librarians to come in an show them how to find the information they'll need.

That all sounds fine so far, doesn't it? Then where's the rub? It's in that phrase: "library instruction is built into the course."

Because the course -- all courses -- are in the hands of the teaching faculty. It takes, then, cooperation, a fairly close-working relationship between librarians and teaching faculty. Most teaching faculty, however, are used to independence in planning courses and implementing them. Moreover, very few faculty are aware of how inept students are in their use of the library; nor can they see what a difference it can make in their teaching effectiveness and in their students' performance for those students to learn how to use the library. Working with teaching faculty, then, takes patience, perseverance and diplomacy. It's not easy, in other words, but there's no question that the results are worth it. This is not the place to talk about strategies for eliciting cooperation, or about types of assignments that can be devised. I should say, though, that when that cooperation has been achieved, and interesting productive assignments have been devised, the result is a symbiotic relationship between the teacher's objectives and the librarian's. That is, the assignment will not only promulgate the teacher's objectives (the subject matter and/or methodology of sociology, literature, chemistry, or whatever) and also the librarian's (how to find information about sociology, literature, chemistry, or whatever), but the two sets of objectives will be mutually reinforcing. When that happens, real learning takes place. Also, when that happens, students' use of and positive attitude towards the library will increase substantially. That's been the experience of every school, college, or university where there's been an effective program of library instruction. Again, it's a lot of work, but the results are worth it.

In a sense, what I'm saying is that such a program will make students appreciate, even enjoy the library. <u>Then</u> one can begin talking to those students about reading. Luxurious buildings, great collections, huge

budgets may impress faculty, administrators and other librarians. But students will only be impressed by them <u>if</u> they can use them for their own purposes. And they cannot -- most of them, anyway -- until they are taught to do so. Only then, when they feel comfortable, enjoy the library, will they turn into the readers we want them to be.